

# This is Your Captain Speaking

Al Cassell

*Cassell recalls what an adventure it could be just getting to a remote test site, in this case the location of the Cannikin event on the island of Amchitka.*

There were roughly 100 of us on the flight destined for the Cannikin Event. We left Oakland early and spent the first night of our trip in Seattle. We were advised that there was no need to take winter clothing as it would all be furnished when we arrived on Amchitka Island, and believe me, in November on Amchitka, winter clothing was essential. So we all took off dressed in light windbreakers or perhaps a sweater, as we had also been advised to travel without much baggage. At that time, the stewardesses on Alaska Air wore Alaska-style clothing—a fur parka—and the favorite drink on Alaska Air was beer, not coffee. At 10 a.m., the stewardesses roamed up and down the aisles carrying bottles and large glasses of beer.

I was traveling with Merwin Gordon of Mechanical Engineering, and we had just settled in for a nice snooze when we detected a strange odor in the compartment, as did others, who began to look around and peer out the windows. The stewardesses were still serving the morning beer when the captain came on the intercom and said, “We have lost our main engine and are going to try to land.” We were flying over a dense forest with no signs of civilization below, so the words “try to” caused a bit of a stir in the passenger cabin.

Almost immediately, the plane began to descend rapidly. We were still looking out of the windows for some sign of an airport when the captain again told us to buckle up and lean forward in our seats.

After an agonizing few minutes, we felt the wheels touch down and could see pine trees very close to the plane as we sped along the ground. The end of the runway was quite visible out the side windows and was coming toward us at a very rapid rate. The plane stopped not

more than 10–15 feet from the trees. We had landed on an abandoned World War II-era emergency airfield named Cold Harbor, which is about half the way up the west coast of Canada. The field had nothing but the landing strip and one shack about 10 feet by 10 feet.

Staying on the plane was considered dangerous, so with no winter clothing, we disembarked and shivered on the runway. A few people went inside the shack, found an oil burner, and then discovered that there was fuel in a barrel just behind the building. Somehow, they got the heater going after an hour or so, but the shack was so small, it would only accommodate 15 of us at any one time.

We sat there on the airfield for several hours, cold and worried, until suddenly out of the forest came a man driving a Jeep, with a scissors jack platform on the rear. To a round of applause, he parked under the rear engine, raised his platform, climbed up to the oil intake, and poured four or five cans of motor oil into the engine. Then he got down and drove off.

“Okay, we can take off now,” said the pilot. This raised a few eyebrows. But we all did as ordered. The captain turned around carefully and, after



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racing the engine for a few moments, took off, while the rest of us crossed our fingers. The plane was to try—again that word “try”—to get to Anchorage. Once airborne, the stewardesses in their parkas passed out beer with complete abandon.

We did get to Anchorage, but after an inspection of the plane, it was thought to be too dangerous to continue out to the Aleutian chain to Amchitka. We had to wait all night and part of the next day to get a new plane to resume our trip. We left the next evening and arrived at Amchitka at night, where the first order of business was the issuance of big fur-lined parkas and hats.



## "I Just Did My Job"

Mary Cunningham-Lusby

*Cunningham-Lusby recalls being the lone female scientist among hundreds of men at the remote Cannikin test site in Alaska.*



Mary Cunningham at Cannikin.

I came to the Lab at the end of 1964. I interviewed first with B Division and was told that the division had no intention of sending a woman out to Site 300. Next I interviewed with Jim Carothers who was head of L Division. He said something about women being a problem at the Nevada Test Site. I said that was his problem, as I didn't see it as a problem at all.

At the Cannikin test series, I was assigned as Containment Scientist, which clearly meant many trips to Amchitka. But the U.S. Department of Energy's Nevada Operations Office (NVO) was very opposed to this. They had never given any sign of opposing my being at the Nevada Test Site, but Amchitka seemed a different matter for them. There were no living quarters for women, there were about 900 men on the island, and what if I were to get sick in a place where there were no female caretakers? Ultimately, NVO agreed that I could go as long as the Lab sent another woman with me. Jack Shearer told them that he could not give up someone to do a baby-sitting job and if NVO wanted another woman on the island while I was there they could send someone themselves. So NVO hired a nurse, Maxine, from Albuquerque to go to the island any time I was there.

I have never considered myself a real feminist; I just did my job and tried to be part of the overall team. I remember when Mike May, who was then the Lab Director, came to visit at Amchitka. The word came down from NVO that there would be a welcome party at the pump house and that I was to turn up properly attired in a dress, etc. I didn't consider it was my job to be a USO tour, so I put on a clean, non-work shirt and, in my corduroys and steel-toed boots, went to the party—just like everyone else.



Amchitka Island.